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ABSTRACT

The provision of work-based training in the United Kingdom was studied to identify strategies for developing and improving the work-based sector. Data were collected from the following sources: a literature review; a postal survey completed by 245 work-based training providers; follow-up interviews; and regional meetings. More than 64% of respondents had been running work-based government-funded training for 6 years or more. Many providers were working across a wide variety of qualifications and occupational areas. The study established that, despite the existence of examples of good and improving practice, new and more challenging standards for work-based learning are needed. The following areas were deemed priority areas for development: advice, guidance, and pastoral support; key skills; learning with information and computer technology; development of a self-critical, self-improving culture; leadership and strategic planning; and mandatory professional qualifications for staff. The following were among the recommendations emerging from the study: (1) teachers, employers, and career advisers should reinforce the legitimacy of the work-based route to qualifications and success; (2) providers need additional training to raise their own key skills levels above those they are teaching and assessing; and (3) detailed explanation of how practice may be developed and improved is required. (Contains 14 references.) (MN)

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feda quality learning skills

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Quality improvement in the work-based sector

Summary report

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1. Introduction

From April 2001, training providers, FE colleges and the adult and community sectors will operate within a single funding and quality framework. Given the increasing importance of work-based learning and workforce development, raising quality across the whole of the new sector will be central to its success. FEDA therefore undertook research into the quality improvement needs of the work-based sector. The research began in the autumn of 1999 and included a review of existing information on the characteristics of work-based learning, a postal survey of providers, follow-up interviews and regional meetings.

Research questions

The research sought answers to two questions:

- What are the characteristics of providers of work-based training supported by government funds?
- What are the development needs of organisations and their staff providing training in this area?

2. Review of existing information

The review drew upon available publications and articles to ascertain:

- How published evidence assesses the work-based learning sectors
- How this evidence supports potential development strategies for organisations involved in the delivery of work-based learning.

Views on quality of provision

The starting point for the review was the 1998–99 annual report of the Training Standards Council's Chief Inspector.[1] The report revealed that half of the three hundred providers inspected in the first year were found to have at least one 'less than satisfactory' or 'poor' aspect to their training. The report is critical of a variety of aspects of work-based training. Fifteen per cent of the training was less than satisfactory or poor, and nearly half of the inspected organisations had at least one area of weakness and will need to be re-inspected within a year.

Other bodies, such as the Industrial Society and Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD),[2] have reported a lack of quality in other training provision in many areas of delivery. Most notably, the Industrial Society survey observed:

> *The biggest barriers to training are poor trainers.*[3]

Other work-based training

While the TSC may have influence over all work-based learning, its remit is to inspect training supported by government funds. There is a great deal of work-based learning, formal and informal, which is being undertaken independently of government support. The Government Statistical Service[4] states that 40% of the UK population aged 25–64 participate in job-related education – the highest in its international survey. Seventy-four per cent of adult education and training receives at least partial funding from the employer – again a higher proportion than any other country (OECD 1998).[5]

IPD research,[6] however, shows that there is a lack of hard information on how much training is happening. The last attempt to gauge the value of training taking place was made by the Employment Department (ED) in 1993 and published three years later by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE).[7] That survey put the total cost of training and on-the-job instruction at nearly £600 a year per employee.

Who are the trainers?

A growing body of inspection evidence and official DfEE data suggest that there may be problem areas in publicly funded provision. A degree of disquiet is also evident across the range of work-based training. Many other bodies concerned with human resource development have expressed concerns about its usefulness to both individuals and employers.[8]

The Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS) (1988)[9] defined four different categories of 'trainer':

- The training manager – with planning, organising responsibility
- The dedicated instructor – deliverer only
- The occasional trainer – whose main role is outside training, but delivers related training
- The integrated training role – with formal development responsibilities alongside job-specific role.

According to the IMS, dedicated trainers were in decline – ageing staff were not being replaced within small operations as well as large in-house operations.

Participation in publicly funded work-based training

There appears to be a downward trend in the take-up of government-funded work-based training. DfEE statistics[10] suggest that in 1998:

- The number of young people in work-based training on 28 June was 8% lower than it was a year ago.
- The number starting work-based training schemes was down 13% over the year.
- The number starting schemes in the three months to 28 June was 52% lower than in the same quarter last year.
- In the three months to 28 June, the number of people starting Modern Apprenticeships was down by 30% compared with the same period last year.
- On other training schemes for young people, the DfEE reported that participant figures on 28 June were 27% lower than they were a year ago.
- The number of adults in work-based training schemes in England and Wales on 28 June had fallen by 34% from last year.
- Compared with 1994, when there were 133,100 adults on work-based training schemes, the overall drop in the number of participants is 74 per cent. It is likely that this decline was in some part the result of uptake of the New Deal, coupled with better employment prospects.

Developments in IT

Many sources, most notably the IPD and Industrial Society,[11] suggest that online work-based learning will make up the majority of work-based learning in the near future. However, the ability to use this medium effectively needs further development.

Perceptions of trainees

The DfEE's Analytical Services Division provided FEDA with information on retention, modes of delivery and the opinions of the participants about their training on the major government-funded programmes, these being:

- Modern Apprenticeships (MA) and National Traineeships (NT)
- Other Training for Young People (OTYP)
- Work-Based Learning for Adults (WBLA).

Key messages from these surveys include:

- Between 20 and 25% of former MA participants said they received no training from their current employer.
- Three-quarters of former MA and OTYP participants think the scheme is at least 'fairly useful'.
- Of those who did not complete the WBLA scheme, three-quarters cite 'a disability problem' as a reason for leaving early.
- Younger people tend to leave schemes for a full-time job, but the WBLA leavers are more likely to enter education.[12]

What are the characteristics of providers?

There is a wide range of organisations delivering government-funded work-based learning. However, the Training Standards Council's Chief Inspector's annual report indicates that, although there are some large, national organisations, many providers are small-to-medium size enterprises (SMEs) operating on a very localised basis.

The Training Standards Council's Chief Inspector's report also notes that there are many small providers with little or no formally trained deliverers, operating a small number of government-funded contracts. Delivery can be very poor and outcomes modest. Spare capacity is limited and the sector has experienced a significant turnover of organisations. Many have ceased to operate after TSC inspections, having lost government funding.

Some groupings of companies are now being set up, and the emergence of the Association of Learning Providers indicates a greater self-awareness of the sector as a significant force in post-16 education and training.

3. The FEDA survey

Responses to the survey

Responses to the postal survey were received from 245 work-based training providers. The range of responding organisations appears to reflect the overall make-up of the work-based training sector.

Figure 1 Responding organisations (%)

Private trainer	36
Employer training own staff	11
Employer training other people's staff	16
An employers' association	5
Charity	11
Public body (such as hospital trusts and local authorities)	9
Further education college	8
Training company that belongs to an FE college, university or independent school	3

Profile of responding organisations

- Over 64% of respondents have been running work-based government-funded training for 6 years or more, with 27% having been established over 16 years. Thirteen per cent of the respondents have been providing government-funded training for two years or less.
- An underlying trend is the absence of new providers entering the market. Many new providers find it difficult to survive. This was perceived as being related to TECs' policies that control entry and tend not to contract with new providers. Funding methods currently do not encourage new providers as start-up costs are high, and a sizeable proportion of funding is paid retrospectively on achievement of outputs. New providers are therefore either very specialist or large national providers moving into a new vocational or geographic area.
- The numbers of trainees that respondents were responsible for varied from two to more than 15,000.
- Eighty-three respondents had been inspected by the TSC. Thirty-four per cent had completed a Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and were addressing strengths and weaknesses. None of those operating for less than two years had been inspected.
- Over half of respondents contract with only one TEC, indicating that they are locally based companies. Thirty-four per cent contract with between two and five TECs and report difficulties in the variations between TECs' initial assessment, quarterly reviews and outcome payments.
- A large number of providers in the survey are working across a wide variety of qualifications and occupational areas. Differences in the requirements of Awarding Bodies, which often conflict with TEC requirements, are reported as significant operational difficulties.
- Almost half of respondents employed ten or fewer dedicated full-time staff and 66% employed five or fewer dedicated part-time staff. Forty-nine per cent employ between 1–5 full-time trainers and 89% employ ten or fewer part-time trainers.

About the learners

- Survey respondents were working with a wide range of learners in terms of ability and types of programmes (and therefore differences in funding and tariffs).
- Eighty-one per cent of providers said their trainees were on programmes leading towards qualifications. Most are aiming for level 2/3 qualifications.
- Some are disadvantaged/reluctant learners – the 'hard to help'.
- Nearly twice as many of the trainees supported by survey respondents were employed or had employed status.
- Thirty-one per cent of providers had no trainees from ethnic minorities. When this was raised at meetings and interviews, some considered this to be in line with the low volume of their local ethnic minority population.

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Management and delivery of training

- Many work-based training providers appear to be operating as managing providers rather than direct deliverers of training.
- Managing subcontractors, who provide the training, is a complex process. In many cases, subcontractors are much bigger organisations, (often the local FE college) and the contract with the provider is simply one of many.
- Staff and time resources for managing subcontractors appear to be insufficient to do justice to the job (often the responsibility of one or two members of staff).
- Nearly half of respondents have only one member of staff supporting trainees in over 50 locations. Respondents saw this as manageable, as long as the assessment function was separate from pastoral support. These views reflect adherence to TEC reporting and monitoring arrangements, but suggest that co-ordination of learning on and off the job is not actively pursued.
- Resources allocated to learning are much less than that for assessment (seen by many as a proxy for learning).
- Despite the aspiration to secure learning at work, the predominant mode of delivery is off-the-job training provided by a subcontractor.
- Seventeen per cent of respondents claimed to be delivering some learning online and 9% were considering this. IT delivery seems to be particularly well developed for training for occupations in the legal sector, with more developed materials and expertise in this area and, possibly, better access to computers.

About the trainers

- In 30% of organisations responding to the FEDA survey, none of the staff had either a teaching or training qualification and only one-third had over 90% of their trainers qualified as assessors.
- Trainers are not likely to be educated to degree level and few are members of professional associations.
- There is significant support for all trainers to be qualified, but some also called for a range of professional qualifications to be available to match the range of roles required to support work-based training.[13]
- High value is placed on occupational competence – 69% agreement with the view that relevant occupational experience is more important than qualifications and 61% disagreement that trainers need teaching experience more than relevant occupational experience.

Support needs

- The majority of respondents thought that they needed little or no support for development, and attributed poor quality to inadequate funding, lack of time and resources, the structure of NVQs and excessive bureaucracy.
- This may reveal a gap in perceptions of quality and awareness of needs and the absence of a self-critical, self-improving culture. Because sharing and exchange of practice are rare, benchmarking practice against that of others is limited. However, some acknowledged that quality is a problem and have welcomed TSC inspections.
- While some respondents are receiving significant support from their TECs or Awarding Bodies, staff development and updating activity is limited due to lack of time and money. Trainers, as opposed to managers, appear to have little access to briefings on contemporary issues or to opportunities to share ideas and develop materials and practice. This lack of inclusion in policy development on curriculum and standards may mean that work-based trainers have little purchase on the education and training system.
- The areas seen by providers responding to the survey as needing most support were related to IT development and Management Information Systems (MIS).
- Many trainers dealing with hard-to-help groups are acutely concerned that they have little access to specialist resources and good quality training materials.
- Over two-thirds of respondents to the FEDA survey said they are prepared to share resources/good practice. There were some caveats to this, with a view that this should be on a 'something-for-something' basis.
- There was widespread dislike of key skills being separately assessed, and most respondents reported difficulties in delivering key skills.
- Poor initial assessment was seen as an issue needing to be addressed.

4. Conclusions and implications for development

There is considerable consistency in the issues emerging from all aspects of this investigation into work-based learning. While good and improving practice is in evidence, there is a need for new and more challenging standards as the importance of work-based learning grows. In particular, there needs to be demonstrable impact on:

- the development of individuals
- the business success of employers
- the country's skill base.

As new systems and resourcing models are put into place, consideration must also be given to the support base for learning in the workplace. Work-based learning must play a key role in securing a learning culture across British industry, and this will take considerable time and investment.

These issues are important for all providers – which, as this research has shown, involves many different types of organisations, from FE sector colleges to small private or voluntary sector providers.

Areas for development: key messages

The FEDA research has revealed a number of priority areas for development, these being:

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Advice, guidance and pastoral support
While pastoral support for individual trainees is reported to be often good, it requires further development in other areas of trainee support. Significant issues that have emerged include:

The image of work-based training and its impact on recruitment
Careers advice is not seen to be sufficiently positive about the value of the work-based route and this has a negative impact on the image of work-based training and recruitment to it. For many young people, the work-based route may be highly appropriate and result in high levels of achievement. But it is still considered to be a 'last resort' option.

Messages from teachers, employers and careers advisers should reinforce the legitimacy of the work-based route to qualifications and success.

Initial assessment and action planning
Poor practice in initial assessment and preparation of training plans is seen to be a problem area by the TSC and others. The lack of appropriate assessment tools and expertise to use them results in a poor start for many trainees. Given the wide range of contexts in which learning takes place, individualised approaches are required that interpret the results of customised screening and diagnostic tests, and provide guidance on effective learning opportunities.

Simple, appropriate and effective methods of initial assessment and action planning need to be developed and staff training for their use provided.

Retention and successful completion
Although the FEDA survey did not find conclusive proof, anecdotal evidence suggests that retention and successful completion is as problematic in the work-based route as in other post-16 provision.

Further investigation of factors influencing retention and successful completion is required, followed by guidelines and support for improvement.

Supporting training in the workplace
In work-based learning, there are many people outside the formal training process who make an important contribution to trainees' success. The success of work-based training is crucially dependent on encouraging ownership by:

- employers
- line managers/supervisors
- peers
- mentors, etc.

Examples of the ways in which this support is harnessed and the benefits to learning should be identified and widely disseminated.

Key skills

Trainers' key skills capacity

Key skills delivery is seen as a major difficulty across the work-based route and providers' confidence levels are very low. Key skills capacity may be as big an issue for some trainers as for their trainees.

Providers need additional training – and funding to secure this – to raise their own key skills levels above those they are teaching or assessing.

Relevance of key skills

Lack of conviction is apparent in the extent to which the mandatory key skills are seen to be relevant to the work-based route, particularly the Application of Number and IT. While work-based trainers are agreed that there needs to be more support for trainees to develop basic skills, there is concern about whether there are opportunities to develop key skills in all occupations, or whether particular key skills are genuinely required to enable trainees to do certain jobs. As one provider commented:

> *Employers want people who are numerate, they don't use pi or mathematical concepts.*

It appears to be common practice to 'leave the key skills until last', even in Modern Apprenticeship programmes, where key skills are a mandatory requirement. This relays powerful messages to trainees and employers about the lack of importance of key skills. It also suggests that key skills development, as opposed to assessment, is given scant attention.

More consideration should be given to the relevance and application of key skills in the workplace.

The relevance of key skills to particular vocational areas should be addressed and vocationally focused materials should be developed.

A review of employer requirements is needed to define key skills for employability more clearly.

Integration into the workplace

The proposed changes to key skills are reported to have made their integration into vocational learning more difficult. Some trainers have great difficulty in finding naturally occurring opportunities for assessment of key skills, and many reported concerns about the new Key Skills tests. These concerns relate to the inconvenience of taking time away from the workplace to sit the tests and to trainees' largely negative experience of external tests.

Development of good practice in teaching and learning key skills in the workplace is required.

Learning with ICT

Developing IT capacity

The major development in work-based learning is predicted to be in online learning. Work-based training providers may find it difficult to adapt to this new demand as their IT capacity – in terms of personal ability, infrastructure and curriculum applications – appears to be limited in many cases.

There are several strands to this issue relating to equipment, materials and expertise. Work placements and job roles vary in the extent to which they provide ready access to computers and in the relevance of IT to working practice. These issues may be resolved over time but, in the immediate future, they disadvantage some individuals and hinder the development of some firms.

Supporting development in the private sector with wholly public-funded programmes of support may not be appropriate. However, because of the importance of the relationship of IT capacity both to the development of individuals and to a more highly skilled workforce, the responsibility for improving capacity must be shared by government and individual providers.

Providers in the work-based sector should have access to matched funding opportunities to develop their ICT capacity.

The lack of knowledge and expertise on the part of training providers, both in terms of their own skills in ICT and in their capacity to spot applications in the workplace, are issues that need to be addressed.

Management Information Systems

MIS will be needed to provide the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) with information in a consistent format and to ensure that trainees' progress is tracked so that difficulties are identified and addressed promptly. The varying scales of operation need to be taken into account, however, as over-complex arrangements may be beyond the capacity of small providers.

MIS requirements need to be considered in close consultation with work-based providers to ensure that compliance is possible, especially in smaller companies.

Developing a self-critical, self-improving culture

Encouraging exchange of practice

The absence of a strong culture of sharing and networking means that many providers are simply unaware of different ways of operating, and have little on which to base comparisons of their own practice. Providers are relatively new to the process of self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses for TSC inspections, but many report significant benefits from this process. The practice of preparing Self-Assessment Reports could be built upon and benchmarking encouraged.

Encouraging networking and sharing within a competitive environment between profit-making and not-for-profit organisations may present difficulties. The issue of public funding for such activities will also need to be resolved. However, the challenges faced by all providers in the new arrangements within the LSC may provide a common purpose, especially if there are clear benefits to all participants.

Cross-sector quality groups, which could be subject- or issue-based should be convened. These could operate on a regional basis and make use of ICT solutions, such as e-mail groups and video conferencing, in addition to face-to-face meetings. Such groups would need to be supported and managed to ensure that they remained focused and that outcomes were disseminated.

Support activity to extend current practice

While the experience of TEC support was variable across the FEDA sample of providers, it proved to be valuable to some organisations and will be missed. The LSC provides the opportunity to develop a more comprehensive approach to quality improvement, which could build on current arrangements. This should include exemplars of good practice that are analytical as well as descriptive, and indicate not just what is being done well, but why this is the case, and how it may be replicated.

Detailed explanation of how practice may be developed and improved is required – covering particular areas of concern, including:

- **initial assessment, action planning and review**
- **equal opportunities – policies and practice**
- **learning support for people with disabilities and learning difficulties**
- **motivating disenchanted and hard-to-help trainees**
- **monitoring trainee progress.**

An action research approach to developing practice would enable trainers to learn on the job.

Models for learning at and through work

While there is a great deal of rhetoric about work-based learning, in practice, most learning appears to be undertaken in traditional off-the-job modes.

More research into models for learning at work is required to demonstrate how the on- and off-the-job experience could be co-ordinated to secure better learning. This should be concerned with both formal and informal learning activities and include a consideration of open, distance and online learning methods.

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Leadership and strategic planning

Leadership

FEDA[14] and other research bodies have demonstrated the positive impact of leadership training on performance. While providers of work-based training have not yet developed a distinctive and shared identity, the emergence of strategic alliances between training providers indicates a growing self-confidence. However, these arrangements may not be fully inclusive and may further marginalise those outside their ambit. They must also be concerned with the development of mission and values, as well as market share, and an understanding of how provision relates to the achievement of economic competitiveness.

Leadership training, within a context of management development, should be promoted in the work-based sector.

Strategic planning

There will be a vacuum in terms of leadership and strategic planning after the TECs have ceased to exist. Work-based training providers will need to develop a greater awareness of labour market needs and how this translates into learning programmes. Planning features prominently in the proposed Learning and Skills world, and meeting the needs of the national and local labour markets is a key strategic goal.

Opportunities for involvement of work-based providers in strategic planning forums should be sought.

Training in the use of Labour Market Information may also be required.

Growing the sector

An underlying trend is apparent in the scarcity of new providers and the inability of new companies to survive. Growing the sector may therefore prove difficult, and this may discourage small, niche providers or SMEs that wish to become training providers.

Funding and regulatory mechanisms should be supportive of large and small-scale organisations. Legislation should be scrutinised for its impact on SMEs in the same way that the Small Business Service (SBS) proposes that government should think small first.

Mandatory professional qualifications for staff

The ambivalence revealed in the FEDA survey to the need for qualifications for trainers may limit the effectiveness of development programmes aimed at promoting a qualified work-based sector. Wholehearted commitment to development activity and progress towards professionally qualified status is required. Without this, training and development may be seen as a chore, rather than a welcome opportunity.

Development programmes and qualifications may be more acceptable if they reflect the high regard for vocational competence held by many staff in the work-based sector.

Other implications of the upgrading of qualifications should also be anticipated, such as the impact on salary levels, and 'leakage' to teaching jobs in the school or FE sectors.

Notes

1. Training Standards Council. *Reaching new standards: annual report of the Chief Inspector, 1998–99*. TSC, 1999.
2. Institute of Personnel and Development. *People mean business: IPD annual report 1998–99*. IPD, 1999.

   Industrial Society. *Staying the course? A survey of trainees' views on training*. Industrial Society, 1999.
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4. ONS. *Labour market trends*. ONS, 2000.
5. OECD. *Education at a glance: OECD indicators, 1998*. OECD, 1998.
6. Institute of Personnel and Development. *People mean business: IPD annual report 1998–99*. IPD, 1999.
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11. Industrial Society. *Staying the course? A survey of trainees' views on training*. Industrial Society, 1999.

    Institute of Personnel and Development. *People mean business: IPD annual report 1998–99*. IPD, 1999.
12. The DfEE has advised FEDA that conclusions in this section be treated with caution, as they are not confident that answers reflect actual numbers who complete MAs.
13. A consultation on minimum qualifications for work-based trainers is currently being undertaken by the DfEE.
14. Somekh B *et al. Improving college effectiveness: raising quality and achievement*. FEDA, 1999.

Further information

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From April 2001, training providers, FE colleges and the adult and community sectors will operate within a single funding and quality framework. Given the increasing importance of work-based learning and workforce development, raising quality across the whole of the new sector will be central to its success. This report summarises the results of FEDA research undertaken to assess the quality improvement needs of the work-based sector.

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